



European Education Area Strategic Framework

Working Group on Schools: Education for Environmental Sustainability

Key messages on Organising and Designing Curriculum and Building Core Competences



Organising and Designing Curriculum and Building Core Competences

This document focuses on designing curriculum for learning for sustainability. The key messages reflect discussions which took place in the EU Working Group on learning for sustainability during its meeting in Brussels on 15-16 September 2022. During the meeting, participants discussed and identified:

- **policy actions** that can assist in the development and introduction of school curricula to improve opportunities for learning for sustainability;
- **frameworks, relevant resources and capabilities** that can assist with the shaping and delivery of these policy actions and relevant pedagogies;
- **key challenges and barriers** and how they could be overcome;
- **lessons learnt** from examples of well-regarded practices in this area.

The workshop included considerations related to core competences in learning for sustainability. Sustainability competences are understood as the interlinked set of knowledge, skills, and values that enable learners to effectively engage in action for a healthier planet. GreenComp, the European sustainability competence framework,¹ and other reference documents seek to guide efforts to embed sustainability competences in the curriculum. The GreenComp framework served as a background to discussions during the meeting.

Whilst it is difficult to make general statements about policy work, given that entry points, structures and practice vary considerably between countries, the Working Group identified the following key messages:

1. Curriculum framing and approaches

- Learning for sustainability is *mostly framed as an interdisciplinary approach* at the policy level across Europe. The competences curriculum model that supports this approach has grown in strength over recent years.
- In countries such as Belgium (Flanders), France, Ireland, Norway, Spain and Italy competency frameworks or learner outcomes are used to frame goals and experiences related to sustainability. At the same time, in the Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Malta and Portugal, sustainability is considered *through selected subjects* and/or other *transdisciplinary areas*, for example citizenship or through outdoor learning.
- In Estonia, Hungary and Slovakia, the curriculum is seen as an important component of a *whole-school approach to sustainability*. Connections between formal learning opportunities and the school environment as well as local community issues have been strengthened over recent years.
- *Learner-centred pedagogies and participatory learning opportunities* are seen as key to the delivery of learning for sustainability in the curriculum in most Member States. Student clubs and competitions as well as special eco-programmes or annual sustainability weeks and other extra-curricular activities complement curriculum learning in, for example in Slovakia, Latvia and Malta.

¹ https://joint-research-centre.ec.europa.eu/greencomp-european-sustainability-competence-framework_en.

- Most countries recognised the importance, but also the challenge, of embedding sustainability in the culture of the school. The *hidden curriculum* (i.e. what students learn from school, aside from the formal academic curriculum) *is seen a powerful means to engage the interest and imagination of learners as well as staff members.*

2. Curriculum practice

- *Primary schools can be more receptive and less constrained to innovate for sustainability in the curriculum. On the other hand, secondary schools are in a position to delve more deeply into fundamental questions about the social structures and agency needed to attain a green transition.*
- In Brussels, the *Climate Academy programme*² is an example of how secondary schools can engage young people in learning about the climate crisis, working collaboratively and with a sense of agency to seek changes for sustainability. Much of this work takes place extra-curricularly during lunchtimes and after school hours. However, this programme, which has been running 10 years, will form the basis of a new module for upper secondary students within the formal curriculum.

3. Vision and framing

- It is important for policy makers to *provide a vision and framing for the curriculum* to advance sustainability, apart from resources and support for implementation. This common vision can give subject teaching a connected sense of purpose that is bigger than discipline knowledge. This can be done through the development of strategy in learning for sustainability or more specifically through identification of teacher competences in this area.
- *Aligning values in education with subject contributions* is a core ambition but also a challenge. Norway has reframed its curriculum keeping in mind this alignment and has developed a core curriculum, frameworks and guidelines that commit teachers to promoting responsibility for sustainability as a value and learning outcome goals in specific subject curricula.
- When looking at countries that actively support schools in learning for sustainability through policy, a particular focus is on *supporting pedagogies that emphasise active learning and task-based work*. This includes making sure that the curriculum provides opportunities to take action on 'real life' issues based on what has been learned through school programmes and to connect with the wider community in doing so.
- *Connecting with the community* is important since it is here that a lot of non-formal and informal learning takes place. Ensuring this connection would help break up the silos often found in the education system. Good practice examples can be taken from vocational training, where the practical component (i.e. simulation of the work environment) can help students understand how they can practically contribute to the green transition. Involving local communities and initiatives can also help foster an intergenerational dialogue.

² [Climate Academy.](#)

- There is also a noticeable tendency among well-experienced countries in this area to emphasise the *democratic opportunities on offer* – spaces for student voice in school decisions on sustainability practices, for example – and an emphasis on the local-to-global progression of learning that learning for sustainability can facilitate.
- Further approaches noted include teacher professional development which focuses more on capability and new approaches, facilitating accreditation for student effort, and working to ensure that schools are encouraged to build on the idea of education *in* the environment, *about* the environment, and *for* the environment.

4. Structures, systems and stakeholders

- There are significant variations relating to curriculum governance across the EU. A key task for policy makers and shapers is to recognise and make explicit the curriculum governance structures in the Member States. Clarifying these variations can also help with European level actions on learning for sustainability.
- The education system is composed of: established structures and agencies that develop policy; those who are tasked with implementing and shaping learning; and a diverse range of stakeholders including educators, young people, trade unions, NGOs, private entities, VET providers, business organisations as well as parents and community groups.
- There can be a *disconnect between the different parts of the system* and addressing this remains a key challenge for curriculum development and renewal. Developing platforms for engagement and creating spaces for dialogue is essential. The Lifelong Learning Platform, for example, enables such exchange and mutual learning. The platform gathers 42 European organisations representing over 50,000 educational institutions and associations in formal, non-formal and informal settings.
- Understanding *the relative influence of stakeholders* and how best to engage them when revising or reviewing curriculum is key to successful implementation. Norway's recent experience of engaging stakeholders throughout the curriculum review process was highlighted as an example of good practice in this area.

5. Youth voices

It is important to *create space for students' voices* in policy making and curriculum development in the same way that it is necessary to bring their local contexts and learning experiences from outside into the classroom. However, it is important to understand the needs of young people and avoid imposing 'top-down' solutions which might not reflect their actual needs.

- Ireland is including young people's voices into curriculum framing and development with groups such as the student unions, Green Schools movement and Eco-UNESCO influencing curriculum practice. The Irish Second Level Students Union (ISSU) have recently been included as members of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment.³

³ <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/c5ba5-minister-foley-announces-addition-of-the-irish-second-level-students-union-to-the-national-council-for-curriculum-and-assessment/>

- Luxemburg is consulting closely with its national student councils as well as Youth4Climate groups whilst undergoing a review of its curriculum.
- UNECE youth platform creates spaces for young people, who represent their member states, to influence regional policy in learning for sustainability. Experiences of involving youth in policy making for sustainability in education across Europe are documented in a recent UNECE publication.⁴

6. Pedagogical and resource tools

- Directly supporting schools through the identification of high-quality materials is an important way to influence implementation and quality learning outcomes. There is a need for resources that promote pedagogies and learning processes required for transformative learning and necessary for a green transition.
- In Portugal, pedagogical guidelines and sample activities have been produced through government and private partnerships providing non-prescriptive documents that schools can adapt. The resources support teaching practice in citizenship and development areas - underpinned by sustainability competences and content.
- Systems thinking can provide a valuable basis to engage with complex issues and relationships associated with sustainability. Systems thinking expands the range of choices available for solving a problem by broadening our thinking and helping us articulate problems in new and different ways.⁵ *Ten Steps Towards Systems Thinking*⁶ resource manual, presented and discussed at the meeting, provides a tangible example of how to shift our mindsets and practice for sustainability through learning and education. It questions how learners view reality and how this influences their choices and actions and can be taught to young learners through relating it to their everyday experience.
- In Spain, teachers are supported through training and resources to create 'learning situations' in the curriculum that address complex tasks and promote creative and critical thinking needed to collaborate in real-life situations. Teachers also meet at the sub-regional level to share experiences of eco-schools and learn from each other.

7. Confronting challenges

- Cultural barriers and attitudes are challenging and can act as obstacles to advancing learning for sustainability policy aspirations. For this reason, there is a need for *clarity on the roles and responsibilities* of all involved when addressing sustainability in the curriculum.
- In some countries, learning for sustainability has become an additional or separate learning requirement whilst in others it has been embedded in curriculum or subject revisions. *Guidance for teachers and leaders on these differing approaches* is called for.
- The great *variability in terms of extent and depth in how sustainability* learning is carried in schools needs addressing. This means that learners can have different and

⁴ https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2022-09/Engaging_Young_People_web_final_05.09.2022.pdf

⁵ <https://thesystemsthinker.com/systems-thinking-what-why-when-where-and-how/>

⁶ https://esd-expert.net/files/ESD-Expert/pdf/Was_wir_tun/Lehr-und-Lernmaterialien/Ten-steps-towards-system-thinking_Book.pdf. The manual was presented at the meeting by Dr Thomas Hoffmann, one of the authors of the manual.

unequal experiences and their preparedness to confront green issues and future sustainability challenges will vary as a result. It is important to strike a balance between supporting teaching and respecting the autonomy of teachers as professionals to plan, design and conduct teaching.

- One of the challenges education systems are facing is the decrease or stagnation in education budgets. With increased instability there is a risk of austerity measures that would hinder the efforts being made in learning for sustainability. Adequate and sustainable public funding to education is needed by the Member States as well as European funding mechanisms. . Only appropriate levels of funding will ensure sustainability is mainstreamed across the curricula and guarantee that educators have the confidence and competence in supporting learners to develop key sustainability competences. Funding is also key in terms of addressing staff shortages in schools across the EU. Investing in additional teaching and non-teaching staff (i.e. sustainability leads or coaches) would relieve the current workforce and support in effectively implementing learning for sustainability through a whole-school approach.

8. Assessing progress

- *Developing monitoring and evaluation* of policy mechanisms at national, regional and sub-regional levels is important so that lessons can be learnt and implemented. This should be done through a co-design process that involves learners and other stakeholders in the review process. To be able to implement monitoring and evaluation in a way that is conducive to improvements in education systems, adequate funding is needed.

- Investment to assess the *long-term impact* of educational policy measures is rare but increasingly necessary especially since learning for sustainability is not only future facing but also concerned with the crucial matter of the health of people and planet.

Those present at the Working Group meeting identified areas for discussion at future meetings. These included:

- a consideration of how youth voice can play a part in curriculum design and development;
- an exploration of how school inspections and quality assurance frameworks can help improve provision;
- a review of the impact and effectiveness of curriculum approaches;
- a dialogue about progression in learning, specific to learning for sustainability through the school years;
- a consideration of needs and good practice in early childhood education and care;
- the role of adults, their involvement in supporting their children's learning and the need for lifelong and life-wide learning.

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